religions

MDPI

Article

Islam and the Pan-Abrahamic Problem

Joshua R. Sijuwade

London School of Theology, Northwood HA6 2UW, UK; joshua.sijuwade@lst.ac.uk

Abstract: This article aims to formulate a philosophical problem that is grounded upon the Pan-Abrahamic nature of early Islam, focusing on the implications that this has for understanding the identity of the contemporary Islamic community. This philosophical problem—termed the Pan-Abrahamic Problem—is structured around the examination of Prophet Muhammad's leadership and the inclusivity of the early Islamic community, as proposed by Fred Donner in the form of the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis. The formulation of this philosophical problem is presented through the lens of the philosophical criteria of continuity and connectedness of aims (doctrine) and organisation, as proposed by Richard Swinburne. This philosophical problem will, thus, offer a challenge against traditional exclusivist narratives within Islam, ultimately aiming to emphasise the inclusive and pluralistic foundation of the religion and the significance of this for the contemporary Islamic identity.

Keywords: Pan-Abrahamic; continuity; connectedness

1. Introduction

According to Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad's proclamation of Islam in Arabia fostered a form of strict religious exclusivism, which influenced his leadership and shaped the early (foundational) Islamic community's identity. This traditional position can be stated more comprehensively as follows:

(1)	(Traditional Islamic Thesis)	Prophet Muhammad's monotheistic proclamation in Arabia (i.e., Mecca and Medina) emphasised strict religious exclusivism and led to various inter-faith tensions that shaped the early Islamic community's identity and the nature of its expansion.

More specifically, Prophet Muhammad's early life in Mecca was marked by hardships, including the loss of his parents and a grandfather who acted as his guardian. Raised in a society steeped in polytheistic beliefs, Prophet Muhammad's monotheistic proclamation, following his divine revelation at the age of 40, ignited tensions with Meccan tribes who saw his message as a threat to their socio-economic and religious status quo. Despite persecution, Prophet Muhammad's commitment to his monotheistic vision garnered a small but growing group of followers, setting the stage for the eventual ideological and political rift between the Muslims and the Quraysh tribe. The increasing hostility in Mecca led Prophet Muhammad to seek refuge in Medina, a pivotal moment known as the Hijra. This migration was not merely an escape from persecution but a strategic move that transformed Prophet Muhammad from a religious preacher into a political leader and statesman. In Medina, he established a new social and political order based on Islamic principles,

Academic Editor: Yasir S. Ibrahim

Received: 4 December 2024
Revised: 30 December 2024
Accepted: 6 January 2025
Published: 7 January 2025

Citation: Sijuwade, Joshua R. 2025. Islam and the Pan-Abrahamic Problem. *Religions* 16: 51. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010051

fostering unity among diverse tribes and setting the foundations for an Islamic state. The tensions with Meccan tribes escalated into armed conflicts, most notably the Battles of Badr and Uhud, where Muslims faced significant challenges but also achieved critical victories. These battles were not just military engagements but also moral and spiritual tests for the early Muslim community, underscoring the theme of divine support and the importance of steadfast faith and unity. In Medina, Prophet Muhammad also navigated complex relations with the Jewish tribes. Initially allies, the relationships deteriorated over time, leading to confrontations and the expulsion or punishment of tribes like the Banu Qurayza. These incidents highlight the complex dynamics of inter-tribal politics and the challenges Prophet Muhammad faced in establishing and maintaining a cohesive Islamic community. The eventual conquest of Mecca by Prophet Muhammad and his followers marked a significant turning point. It was not only a military triumph but also a moral and spiritual victory, demonstrating the power of forgiveness and the impact of Prophet Muhammad's leadership. The peaceful nature of the conquest and Prophet Muhammad's decision to pardon many of his former adversaries were pivotal in solidifying the acceptance and expansion of Islam. Prophet Muhammad's final years were characterised by the rapid expansion of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula. His death left a lasting legacy, with his teachings and the model of his life continuing to shape the Islamic faith and community. The exclusivity of Prophet Muhammad's monotheism challenged not only the polytheistic beliefs of Mecca but also intersected with and sometimes clashed against the existing monotheistic traditions, namely Judaism and Christianity, which were present in the Arabian Peninsula. While all three Abrahamic faiths share a belief in one God, Prophet Muhammad's message emphasised a direct, unmediated relationship with God, distinct from the Christian concept of the Trinity and the Jewish covenantal tradition. Prophet Muhammad's interactions with the Jewish tribes in Medina are particularly illustrative of the evolving nature of religious exclusivism in this period. Initially, there seemed to be a potential for coexistence, as Prophet Muhammad's message resonated with monotheistic themes familiar to Jewish teachings. However, the political and social realities of Medina, combined with theological differences, led to increasing tensions. These tensions culminated in the expulsion of Jewish tribes, such as the Banu Qaynuqa and Banu Nadir, due to perceived betrayals or conflicts that threatened the nascent Muslim community's cohesion and security. The case of Banu Qurayza is particularly notable, where the tribe faced severe consequences following accusations of treachery during a critical moment of conflict. These incidents of expulsion and conflict highlight how religious exclusivism could be exacerbated by political and social pressures, leading to actions that had lasting implications for interfaith relations. Prophet Muhammad's approach to the Jewish tribes, which ranged from alliances to confrontations, reflects the complex nature of establishing a new religious community amidst diverse and sometimes competing religious traditions. Furthermore, the concept of religious exclusivism during Prophet Muhammad's time was not just about theological purity but also about forming a distinct, unified community identity. This identity was crucial for the survival and expansion of the early Muslim community, especially in the face of external threats and internal divisions. The challenges and triumphs of Prophet Muhammad's life underscore the complex relationship among faith, politics, and leadership that defined his prophetic mission and laid the groundwork for the spread of Islam across the globe.

Now, this historical account of Prophet Muhammad's life, largely drawn from sources compiled well after his time, raises concerns about accuracy due to potential biases and legendary embellishments aimed at affirming Prophet Muhammad's prophetic status or establishing community practices. These sources, such as the Sira literature (the biographies of Prophet Muhammad—namely, the work of Ibn Ishaq (as preserved, in part, by Ibn

Hisham) termed *Sirat Rasul Allah*), Hadith collections (sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad), and early Islamic historiographies (such as that of (again) the work of Ibn Ishaq, and Al-Tabari termed *Tarikh al-Tabari*), which are filled with contradictions and questionable episodes, leave historians sceptical about their reliability, particularly given the lack of contemporary documents or inscriptions from Prophet Muhammad's era. While some scholars outright reject these traditional narratives, others see them as containing kernels of early material worth scrutinising for historical authenticity. A historical analysis of the earliest evidence concerning Islam in contemporary times has suggested that the traditional portrayal may not have solid historical foundations. Instead, a foundation aligning with the "Pan-Abrahamic" thesis that was proposed by Donner (2010) seems to be what is grounded upon the available historical evidence. That is, the following evidence identified by Donner (2010) indicates a broader, more inclusive early Islamic ("Believers") community that encompassed various Abrahamic faiths:[1]

(2)	(Pan Abrahamic Thesis)	(i) *Qur'anic Distinctions*: The Qur'an often distinguishes between "Believers" and "Muslims", showing a nuanced view where "Believers" include some People of the Book, suggesting a broader religious community that transcends strict Islamic identity and their potential salvation. (ii) *The Constitution of Madinah*: This document recognises Jews as part of Prophet Muhammad's community, highlighting their inclusion alongside Believers and Muslims in a unified socio-political framework. (iii) *Historical Accounts*: Various sources recount diverse interactions, such as Arab–Jewish alliances, Jewish acknowledgement of Prophet Muhammad's messianic role, Christians in the Islamic military, and mutual respect for sacred spaces. (iv) *Early Islamic Artefacts*: Initial Islamic artefacts include the term "Believers" to denote the community, reflecting a focus on monotheism over specific Islamic identifiers until the later Marwanid period. (v) *Hadith Narratives*: These stories depict early Islamic engagement with other faiths, including using the Torah, respecting Christian holy sites, and Christian contributions to the Islamic military and administration.

The Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, which is grounded upon the evidence of (2) and which posits that early Islam was a broad, ecumenical/interconfessional Abrahamic "Community of Believers" that was inclusive of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, was, as noted above, first proposed by Donner (2002, 2010),[2] but has now gained considerable acceptance among influential scholars of early Islamic history, as Penn (2015, p. 180) writes the following:[3]

> What was once relegated to a handful of specialists has become increasingly mainstream in the study of classical Islam. Recent works by scholars such as Chase Robinson, Stephen Shoemaker, and others emphasise the difficulties in

differentiating seventh-century Islam from other monotheistic traditions. Although not without its detractors, such scholarship suggests a fairly substantial paradigm shift.

Despite the centrality of this thesis within Islamic studies, this specific thesis has not played a role in discussions within the contemporary philosophical literature. And, in shining a light on this thesis within this context, it reveals a certain problem—which we can term the "Pan-Abrahamic Problem"—that raises an issue concerning the identity of the 21st-century Islamic community. This is that, given the veracity of the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, which affirms the establishment of an ecumenical community by Prophet Muhammad, one can raise the issue of whether the Islamic community that exists in the present age, which disaffirms this position and, thus, conceives of itself as an exclusivist community (in line with the Traditional Thesis in (1)) is identical (i.e., is the same entity) as the foundational community that was established by Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century.

This article will raise the specific charge that it is not, as on the basis of the philosophical conception of the identity of communities developed by Swinburne (2007), this community lacks the important features of continuity and the connectedness of doctrine and organisation, relative to the ecumenical nature of the foundational community established by Prophet Muhammad and, thus, it cannot be identified as this community, or at least some form of a present-day continuation of it. Rather, as will be argued for, on the basis of the historical evidence, identified by Donner (2010) and other individuals who have followed his lead, such as Shoemaker (2011), Cole (2018), and Lindstedt (2019), there is indeed a discontinuity between that of Prophet Muhammad's community and the Islamic community of the 21st century, and, instead, this community can be taken to be one that has its roots in the reformulated community of Muslims that was introduced by 'Abd al-Malik in the latter half of the 7th century. The Pan-Abrahamic Problem (hereafter, PAP), thus, challenges the notion of continuity within the Islamic community from its inception to the present day. And thus a dilemma emerges when considering the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, which suggests that Prophet Muhammad established an inclusive community encompassing various Abrahamic faiths. If this thesis holds true, it challenges the traditional understanding of Islam as a community defined by a distinct and exclusive religious identity from its earliest days. Hence, the central questions presented to a Muslim are thus as follows: if the early Islamic community, as posited by the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, was inclusive of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, forming an ecumenical "Community of Believers", how does this reconcile with the contemporary Islamic community's perception of itself as exclusively Muslim, aligning more with the Islamic Traditional Thesis? Does this shift in self-perception and identity signify a break in continuity from the original community established by Prophet Muhammad? The crux of the dilemma lies in determining whether the modern Islamic community can be seen as a direct continuation of the original community founded by Prophet Muhammad. If the early community was characterised by inclusivity and ecumenism, as suggested by some historical evidence, the current exclusivist self-conception among Muslims represents a significant transformation in the community's identity. This transformation implies a lack of continuity in doctrine and organisation, thus challenging the notion that the present-day Islamic community is a direct descendant of the 7th-century community. More specifically, when analysed through the criteria of continuity and connectedness of doctrine and organisation, one is, in fact, led to a significant conclusion: the present-day Islamic community is not a direct continuation of the original community established by Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. As again, if we accept the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, then the evolution to a more exclusivist Islamic identity represents a substantial shift in doctrine and organisation. This transformation, thus, suggests a lack of connectedness and continuity with the original

community's inclusive nature and its organisational framework, which was presumably designed to accommodate a more diverse congregation of believers. Given this issue, one must potentially affirm the fact of a non-identity of the contemporary Muslim community and that of the foundational established by the Prophet, which is, thus, an important issue that an adherent of Islam must find a solution for. For further clarity, we can now express the PAP in deductive argument form as follows:

(3)	(PAP Deductive Argument)	Premise 1: If a later religious community lacks doctrinal and organisational continuity and connectedness with the founder's community, it is not identical to the founder's community. Premise 2: The founding community established by Muhammad, according to the Pan Abrahamic Thesis, was doctrinally and organisationally inclusive of non-Muslims, especially Jews and Christians. Premise 3: The contemporary Muslim community is doctrinally and organisationally exclusive, viewing Islam as the only path to salvation and limiting membership to Muslims. Conclusion 1: The contemporary Muslim community lacks doctrinal and organisational continuity and connectedness with Muhammad's founding community. (From premises 2 and 3) Conclusion 2: The contemporary Muslim community is not identical to Muhammad's founding community. (From premise 1 and Conclusion 1) Conclusion 3: Given Conclusion 1 and 2, Muslims must choose one of the following: Option 1: Ignore the issue, despite Qur'anic directives. Option 2: Reject continuity and connectedness criteria, despite intuitive plausibility. Option 3: Reject the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, despite the historical evidence. Option 4: Accept results and reform to align with early Islam's inclusivity, requiring the overturning of tradition. Option 5: Accept results and reject Islam, as it no longer exists as originally conceived.

This argument presents a significant challenge to the contemporary Islamic community's self-understanding, as it forces Muslims to grapple with the apparent discrepancy between the inclusive nature of Muhammad's original community and the exclusivity of modern Islam. Additionally, the options presented highlight the difficult choices Muslims face in responding to this issue, ranging from ignoring the problem to rejecting Islam altogether. In all, this argument calls for a deep reflection on the nature of religious identity and continuity and the implications of historical and theological shifts within a religious tradition. Ultimately, however, it will be shown that the conditions of rationality require that Option 5—accepting the results and rejecting Islam, as it no longer exists as originally conceived—must be chosen as the only logically consistent and historically grounded response to the doctrinal and organisational discontinuity demonstrated by the argument of the PAP.[4]

The plan of action is as follows: in Section 2 ("The Identity of Communities: Twin Criteria"), the specific criteria concerning the identity of communities proposed by Swinburne will be unpacked, and a religious extension of it will also be further explicated. In Section 3 ("The Nature of Pan-Abrahamic Thesis: An Ecumenical Community"), the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis introduced by Donner and further corroborated by Shoemaker, Cole, and Lindstedt, will be detailed in full. Then, in Section 4 ("The Pan-Abrahamic Problem: A Challenge of Identity"), the criteria and positions detailed in the previous section will be brought together to formulate the PAP, which will be shown to present a conceptual challenge concerning the identity of the contemporary Islamic community and that of the foundational community established by Prophet Muhammad, an issue that an adherent of Islam will need to address—with certain potential solutions being put on the table for them within this section. Finally, after this section, there will be a concluding section ("Conclusion"), which will summarise the above results and conclude the article.

2. The Identity of Communities: Twin Criteria

According to Swinburne (2007, p. 359), one can utilise the notion of "connectedness" and "continuity" found within the work of Parfit (1984)—where he explores personal identity over time through psychological connections and continuity (marked by overlapping memories and character traits)—to analyse the identity of communities, artefacts, and non-conscious entities, requiring continuous connectedness for identity continuity. This is that, in the context of personal identity, Parfit (1984) argues that a person X at time t1 is the same person as Y at a later time t2 if there are strong psychological connections between X and Y, such as X and Y share many of the same memories, beliefs, desires, and character traits (so, for example, suppose an individual Alice at age 20 shares many of the same core memories, beliefs, values, and personality traits as Alice at age 50, then, per Parfit (1984), there is strong psychological connectedness and continuity between 20-year-old Alice and 50-year-old Alice, and so they can be considered the same person despite bodily and some mental changes over the 30-year gap). This conceptualisation of identity over time, in Swinburne's (2007) thought, can be extended to other domains beyond personal identity, such as the identity of groups, objects, and even non-sentient beings. That is, on the basis of this, according to Swinburne (2007, p. 174), for every human community—be it states, countries, clubs, business enterprises, or sports teams—the identification of a subsequent community as the same entity as its forerunner is grounded on it possessing adequate "connectedness" and "continuity" with the prior community in two key aspects: *aims and organisation*. We can state the central aspects of this criteria succinctly as follows:

(4)	(Continuity-Connectedness)	An authentic community, of any type, maintains continuity and connectedness with its foundational form over time in two key aspects: (i) *Aims*: the community's core aims, teachings, doctrines, or mission remain consistent, even if the specific ways of pursuing or articulating those aims evolve. (ii) *Organisation*: the community's structure and ways of operating show a continuous, gradual evolution from its original form, rather than abrupt, total discontinuity.

So, for a community to remain the same entity over time, it must demonstrate sufficient continuity and connectedness in its aims and organisation, while still allowing for

development and adaptation—and thus, radical breaks in either aims or structure would undermine its continuous identity. In unpacking all of this in more depth, one can understand that the notion of connectedness involves the characteristics of the subsequent community largely mirroring those of the original, and continuity is about having a community at each intermediary phase that maintains connectedness with the original and exhibits strong connectedness with each temporally adjacent community (Swinburne 2007). In simpler terms, changes to its aims and organisation should be incremental and subtle. For instance, consider the connectedness and continuity of the aims of a book club. To maintain its identity as the same book club, the primary activity should still involve books. Yet, if the book club transitions from discussing literature to becoming a group focused on culinary arts, where members meet to cook and discuss recipes instead of books, this signifies a radical change. Such a shift means that the club is no longer the same entity it was when it focused on literature—as there must also be continuity in pursuing these aims over time. This dramatic transformation would indicate that the club's core identity has shifted from a literary focus to a culinary one, completely altering its foundational aims. Similarly, for a more concrete example, imagine Oxford University—which is a prestigious institution of higher learning renowned for its academic excellence, research contributions, and collegiate system—abruptly transformed all its colleges and departments into stores exclusively selling athletic shoes, such as running shoes, basketball shoes, and football boots (or cleats). Even if these new stores retained Oxford University's name and buildings, the university would no longer be the same entity, as its core aims transformed dramatically from providing higher education and advancing scholarship to selling sports footwear. This radical change would undermine the continuity of Oxford's foundational identity as a university—as its key offerings, target audience, and institutional model would be fundamentally altered. The athletic shoe stores might occupy Oxford's historic buildings, but they would constitute a distinct entity due to the total discontinuity in aims. Yet, as Swinburne (2007, p. 175) notes, connectedness and continuity in aims alone are insufficient; returning to our previous examples, if a book club or Oxford college is acquired and repurposed by another institution, even if it continues similar activities with the same members, it transforms into a different community. Identity also requires connectedness and continuity in the organisation and membership, reflecting the original community's structure. Thus, significant changes in ownership, authority, membership, or operational processes can disrupt a community's continuity and alter its fundamental identity, even if its aims remain largely unchanged.

Let us say that there was a book club with a constitution outlining governance and membership rules—similarly, for our more concrete example, Oxford University has a well-defined collegiate organisational structure, academic governance procedures, and administrative hierarchies that are outlined in university statutes and policies. And so if a subsequent book club or Oxford college adheres to these established rules and norms, even with minor amendments, it maintains its identity and connectedness. This adherence ensures a high degree of connectedness. However, unforeseen circumstances may challenge strict adherence. For instance, if a book club election occurs with shorter notice than required or if an Oxford college temporarily modifies its teaching arrangements due to exceptional circumstances, their identity persists despite these organisational discrepancies. That is, such minor deviations do not fundamentally alter the core identity of the book club or Oxford college. Yet, not all societies begin with formal constitutions, as some—like most book clubs—develop unwritten norms reflecting consensus decision-making. Hence, if leadership and membership choices align with established practices, organisational connectedness is maintained. Furthermore, continuity in organisation means that despite minor procedural deviations over time, if the core processes evolve gradually, the commu-

nity's identity is preserved. Contrast this with rapid changes, which would signify a new community's emergence, where again we can take a look at our concrete example: imagine if Oxford not only changed its aims—its core mission from education and scholarship to athletic shoe retail—but also radically restructured its organisation—such as if Oxford abruptly abolished its collegiate system, eliminated all academic positions and governing bodies, and replaced them with a corporate retail structure, this would further alter its identity. As rapid, sweeping changes throughout Oxford's governing council, college relationships, and key academic personnel would make it difficult to view the institution as a continuation of the original Oxford University. The degree of connectedness and continuity can vary, but such extensive shifts in both aims and organisation would signify the emergence of a fundamentally new entity, despite retaining the Oxford name. And so, generally, the degree of connectedness and continuity is able to vary, but there cannot be radical transformation in either of these tenets, if identity over time is to be maintained. Additionally, as Swinburne (2007, p. 176) notes, when a clear "optimal candidate" for continuity exists, significantly demonstrating connectedness and continuity with the original, no other community can claim that identity. Hence, even when a new group emulates the original's aims and organisation, the community with a history of continuity retains its identity. Now that we have unpacked the twin criteria of continuity and connectedness, it will be important to apply this within a general religious context.[5]

Most religious communities have traced their origins to a foundational community, with few emerging from non-member groups. That is, major denominations within various religious communities have arisen from existing community divisions—such as one group, "Group A", another group, "Group B", and a third group, "Group C", having diverged from one another following something, such as a significant conciliar definition or disagreement. Hence, to determine the authentic religious community reflecting, for example, the "original revelation" given to the community, one has to identify the group maintaining the foundational community's identity. This identification, as noted previously, centres on the best fulfilment of connectedness and continuity in aim and organisation, which are largely determined by connectedness and continuity of doctrine—where they are regarded as essential components of the specific original religious community. Doctrinal connectedness with the foundational community is demonstrated through historical consistency in teaching, and continuity in doctrine signifies teachings that are historically derived and maintained from the prior community, especially the foundational community, and, thus, there only being an allowance of gradual doctrinal evolution. However, numerous religious communities can assert both profound connectedness and the continuity of doctrine with that of the foundational religious community—without being accused of discarding historical doctrines considered crucial, yet their evolved doctrines significantly differ—thus, the necessity for the organisation criterion to differentiate among them. Thus, the connectedness of organisation involves demonstrating, through standard historical methods, that a later religious entity possesses an organisational structure akin to the foundational community. The continuity of organisation with a prior religious community, extending to the foundational community, depends on any organisational transformation being explicitly sanctioned by the previously organised community—or occurring gradually while maintaining essential connectedness with the foundational community. A religious organisation encompasses aspects, such as entry rites, forms of worship, who leads the worship, the process for selecting officials, their inauguration methods, and the authorities responsible for developing and declaring doctrinal interpretations. Initially, a religious community can lack a written constitution, making disputes over whether a later entity mirrors the foundational community's organisation, based on historical evidence, potentially more complex than those about doctrine. However, compelling evidence may

indicate that a certain religious entity from after an earlier century falls short of the organisation continuity criterion. In addition to this, a group formed in the 21st century with a shared interest in the teachings of the central figure of the religious community—without stemming from a schism—cannot be deemed part of the original religious community. Yet, in many instances of schism, it is not evident which entity maintains greater organisational continuity with the former community. In scenarios where, as best as we can determine, two entities equally meet the organisational criteria, the two doctrinal standards might help differentiate between them and vice versa. In all, these pairs of criteria substantially contribute to discerning which modern religious community (if one exists) is the original community founded by the central religious figure.

In summary, Swinburne's application of Parfit's notions of connectedness and continuity to community identity provides a robust framework for assessing the identity of both secular and religious communities over time. The twin criteria of connectedness and continuity in aims and organisation are essential for preserving identity, allowing for gradual evolution but rejecting radical breaks or transformations. This framework is particularly valuable in religious contexts, where questions of doctrinal and organisational continuity often arise. Thus, by maintaining continuity and connectedness in both aims (doctrine) and structure, communities can assert their identity as legitimate continuations of their foundational forms.

3. The Nature of the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis: An Ecumenical Community

According to Donner (2010, p. 57), the dating of the Qur'an to the earliest stage of the movement initiated by Prophet Muhammad offers historians a lens to examine the early community's beliefs and values.[6] That is, while later texts provide additional context, their potential for interpolation necessitates careful use. Hence, the Qur'an remains a primary source for understanding the early Islamic period. And so, in focusing on this specific source, one can see, as noted by Donner (2010, pp. 57–58), that the Qur'an—such as in Q. 49:14 and in its frequent usage of the term "O you who Believe . . ."—predominantly addresses individuals identified as "Believers" (mu'minun), contrasting with later and modern references to Prophet Muhammad's followers as "muslims" (muslimun), meaning "those who submit". This distinction is vital for understanding the early community's self-perception, according to Donner (2010, p. 57), as the term "Believer" is significantly more prevalent in the Qur'an than "muslim"—with the former being used thousands of times and the latter being used only seventy-five times. This emphasis reflects the early community's identity primarily as a *community of Believers*, not just muslims—with early documents post-Prophet Muhammad's death supporting this nomenclature, with a shift away from the term "muslims" used in later traditions.[7] At the core of the belief of the community of believers was the acknowledgement of God's oneness, a central theme that the Qur'an repeatedly emphasises—as noted in Q. 5:73—countering the prevalent polytheistic views in Mecca, thus advocating for a strict understanding of God's oneness. In addition to strict monotheism, belief in the Last Day and divine judgment was another central tenet of the belief of the community—with the Qur'an detailing the apocalyptic events and final accountability of all beings. The acceptance of prophets and divine revelation was also crucial, with the Qur'an positioning itself as the culmination of God's communication to humanity, superseding previous scriptures. Alongside the beliefs of the community, Donner (2010, pp. 61–68) notes that the Qur'an outlines a life of piety required of Believers, encompassing regular prayer, humility, and charitable actions toward others, reflecting a strong egalitarian ethos. Specific rituals, such as regular prayer times, fasting, especially during Ramadan, and pilgrimage practices, were delineated, ultimately forming a structured religious life. Moreover, charity, conceptualised initially as atonement for

sins, evolved into a broader notion of supporting the less fortunate. In all, the Qur'anic evidence, as noted by Donner (2010, p. 68), indicates that early Believers focused on monotheism, the Last Day, prophecy, scripture, and righteous actions, such as prayer, atonement, fasting, and humility. These concepts were known in the Near East by the seventh century but uniquely presented in the Qur'an in Arabic. Early Believers, thus, saw themselves as a distinct community of devout monotheists, differentiating themselves from non-conformist polytheists or lax monotheists. Despite this distinct identity, early Believers did not, according to Donner (2010, p. 71), see themselves as a new religious faction. For example, Prophet Muhammad's message, consistent with earlier prophets, is articulated in passages, such as Q. 46:9, and suggests inclusivity where pious Jews and Christians could join the movement, thus recognising shared monotheistic and ethical values—with the term "muslim" in the Qur'an originally, as noted previously, meaning a "submitter" and "committed monotheist", as seen in Q. 3:67, not solely adherents of a distinct religion. That is, as Cole (2018, p. 102) notes, all individuals who submit to the one God and accept the tradition initiated by Abraham about his oneness and uniqueness are, thus, muslims—and, thus, the Qur'an does not employ the term muslim and the more general term, islām, to refer to the religion of Muhammad *specifically*. This is further exemplified in Q. 3:199 and Q. 3:113–116, indicating that righteousness could align Christians and Jews with the Believers. Believers, irrespective of their faith background—be it Christianity, Judaism, or "Qur'anic monotheists"—were expected to adhere to God's laws, as outlined *in their respective scriptures*. Hence, at an epistemic and linguistic level, as noted by Donner (2010, p. 72), the Believers originating from Christian or Jewish backgrounds retained their respective identities, while those that previously practised polytheism were no longer labelled "*mushrik*" once they adopted monotheism and adhered to Qur'anic law, thus, being referred to as "Quranic monotheists", and then, subsequently, the more distinctive term "muslim" was applied to them. That is, over time, the term "muslim" became specifically associated with these "new monotheistic" Believers who observed Qur'anic law. Nevertheless, prior to this restriction in the term Muslim that occurred after the Prophet's death, the community under him identified all as "muslims". Thus, during his life, Prophet Muhammad was building a concentric circle within his united community, a "narrow" circle of "muslims" comprising Qur'anic monotheists who lived according to the Qur'anic revelation, and a larger, ecumenical circle of "muslims", which included individuals from the other Abrahamic (monotheistic) faiths (e.g., Christianity and Judaism) who were to live according to their own revelations.

This establishment of a united community is expressed clearly, as noted by Donner (2010), through the "Constitution of Medina" (the "umma document"), which provides further historical context by showing Jews (and potentially some Christians) as being part of Prophet Muhammad's community,[8] suggesting a shared community that transcended religious boundaries, though still upholding individual legal traditions. Hence, in re-evaluating the early Islamic narrative, it is evident, according to Donner (2010, pp. 74–77), that the movement was open to all committed monotheists—with this inclusivity being echoed in Prophet Muhammad's role in Yathrib/Medina, where his leadership and role as an arbiter—as shown expressed in various traditional narratives concerning this period—was accepted by diverse community members, including Jews. Moreover, the Qur'anic portrayal of Prophet Muhammad, in Q. 33:40 and Q. 7:157, references terms like "rasul" (messenger) and "nabi" (Prophet) and, thus, highlights his foundational role in guiding the community towards monotheism and ethical living. While some of Prophet Muhammad's teachings might have conflicted with contemporary Jewish and Christian beliefs, the essential message embraced by early Believers—focused on monotheism, righteousness,

and following Prophet Muhammad's guidance—was broadly inclusive, reflecting a period of ecumenical openness in the formation of the Islamic community.

The Qur'an takes a positive view of the "ahl al-kitāb" (Jews, Christians, and Sabians) who share faith in God and the Last Day, and, therefore, suggesting their integration with the Believers (Q. 2:62, 5:69). However, the Qur'an distinguishes between the accepting ahl al-kitāb and those who are resistant to Prophet Muhammad's message amongst them, which, thus, reflects a division within these communities based on their response to the Prophet. Despite this general positive approach to the ahl al-kitāb, some passages, such as Q. 4:171, 5:73, 5:75, 19:35, and 5:17, 72, seem to present a more stringent challenge to a certain group of the ahl al-kitāb—namely, the Christians—as these passages appear to condemn central Christian doctrines, such as that of the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, and his Sonship. Given this apparent rejection of core Christian doctrines, how is it that Christians could be accepted into the believing community? As does this not present a significant tension, if not an outright implausibility, in reconciling their inclusion with the Qur'an's strong denunciation of some of their central beliefs? Now, Donner's (2010, p. 77) specific response to this issue has been to assert that the few Qur'anic verses critiquing the Trinity (and other Christian doctrines) as contrary to strict monotheism would have significantly deterred devout Trinitarian Christians. However, understanding these issues from our current perspective centuries later is easier than it would have been at the time. That is, most early followers of Muhammad were likely illiterate, without personal access to the Qur'an and, thus, were familiar with its teachings primarily through recitation. Hence, their understanding of religious principles was basic, centred on monotheism, the approaching Last Day, righteous living, and Muhammad's role as God's messenger. It is *these* core beliefs that were less likely to conflict with the Christian views of the time. However, even though this seems to be the case, one does not have to adopt this position forwarded here by Donner (2010), concerning the Qur'an's view of central Christian teachings—and, thus, the unacceptability of it for the Christians within the community of Believers—as recent scholarly work concerning the historical context of these verses has shed further light that seems to indicate that they were not actually aimed at Christian doctrinal teaching but certain distortions of it (i.e., heresies).[9] This can be seen as follows: first, for Q. 4:171 and 5:73, these verses warn against saying "God is one of three", which seems to negate the doctrine of the Trinity. However, as Block (2011) argues, this is not a critique of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity but rather a denouncement of "Philoponian Monophysite Tri-Theism", which is a belief in three separate gods—with this perspective being supported by the historical presence of various Christian sects that adopted this Christological perspective—that is Philoponian Monophysitism—in the Arabian Peninsula, due to the fact that Christians do not make the claim that "God is one of three".[10] More specifically, Philoponian Monophysite Tri-Theism, which was developed by the Greek philosopher John Philoponus (490–570 CE) and promulgated by some of his followers in Arabia—specifically, that of bishops Conon and Eugenius—diverged from mainstream Christian theology by advocating for three separate, independent, and distinct divine entities—who, thus, possesses their own individual divine nature—as a logical entailment of a Monophysite Christology (i.e., a Christology in which Christ has one nature). This heretical view was notably distinct from the "orthodox" doctrine of the Trinity, which emphasises the existence of one God, the Father, and two other coexistent, coeternal divine persons, the Son and the Spirit, who share the same nature as the Father (that is, they share *the Father's* own nature (i.e., they are *homoousious* with the Father)). The presence of such heterodox beliefs among certain Christian communities in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly those influenced by Philoponus, underscores the Qur'an's target in addressing specific theological inaccuracies prevalent in the region at the time. As Block (2011) notes,

certain pre-Islamic Christian communities in the region, such as those in Najran, adhered to a form of Christianity that could be misinterpreted as advocating for the worship of three separate gods (that is, the worship of God (Allah) as one of three gods (i.e., independent and distinct divine entities who possess their own individual nature)). Thus, the Qur'an's address in this verse and in others[11] can be seen as a response to these particular theological positions rather than mainstream Christian Trinitarian doctrine (that posits the existence of only one "God": the Father (with the Son and Spirit being divine in the same way as the Father but are dependent on him, and so are not "God")). Second, for Q. 5:75, this verse emphasises Jesus' humanity by mentioning that he and his mother, Mary, ate food, thus, indicating that they are corruptible humans. However, according to Khorchide and von Stosch (2019, pp. 113–14), this verse can more accurately be interpreted as a refutation of "Julianism", a doctrine named after the miaphysite bishop Julian of Halicarnassus (d. 527 CE) and which emphasised the incorruptibility of Christ to the extent that it denied his full human experience, including normal human functions, such as eating. More fully, Julian argued that since Jesus was born free of sin through the Virgin Mary, his body must have been free from all consequences of sin, including natural mortal needs. While Julian did not deny that Jesus ate, drank, or experienced hunger, he insisted these were all voluntary acts that Jesus chose to do rather than natural necessities. For Julian, Jesus's body was incorruptible (*aphtharsia*) from birth, and any seemingly human limitations were freely chosen acts of divine will rather than genuine human needs. This doctrine, according to Khorchide and von Stosch (2019, p. 23), became highly influential across the region—Emperor Justinian embraced aspects of it in 564/565 CE, it spread through Syrian and Iraqi monasteries, and according to Michael the Syrian, it influenced Ethiopia, Armenia, and Arabia—and there were reportedly even Julianists in Najran who had contact with Muhammad (Khorchide and von Stosch 2019, p. 25). This theological position was adopted as imperial teaching within the Arabian Peninsula at the time, overstressing Christ's divinity at the expense of his humanity, and thus potentially denying his human experiences and needs. In light of this, when the Qur'an emphasises that Jesus and Mary "ate food like other mortals", it appears to be specifically rejecting Julian's view that Jesus only ate by choice rather than necessity. The Qur'an insists that Jesus had to eat because he was truly human, not because he voluntarily chose to do so as an act of solidarity. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that Julian's view of Jesus's incorruptibility was tied to Mary's virginity, suggesting a possible extension of this doctrine to Mary herself—which could explain why the Qur'an mentions both Jesus and Mary eating food. Hence, this perspective, by undermining the human aspects of Jesus, contradicts the core Christian doctrine of the hypostatic union—the complete and perfect union of divine and human natures in the one person of Jesus Christ. The Qur'an's statement can thus be seen as an affirmation of Jesus' complete humanity, which aligns with the Christian understanding that Jesus is both a fully divine *and* a fully human being. Rather than simply attacking Christianity, the Qur'an appears to be engaging with a specific and influential theological debate about the nature of Christ's humanity, siding with those Christian theologians who insisted that Christ's participation in genuine human suffering and limitation was essential to orthodox Christian teaching.

Third, Q. 19:35 states that it is not befitting for God to take a son and is sometimes interpreted as a direct rebuttal to the Christian doctrine of the "Sonship" of Jesus. However, as Khorchide and von Stosch (2019, pp. 76–77) also note, this critique was actually aimed at pre-Islamic (i.e., pagan) Arab beliefs, which included the notion of God having literal offspring. That is, the term "walad" used in the Qur'an, which implies a biological son, was not how Christians described Jesus' relationship with God, using instead the term "ibn" to reflect a theological rather than a biological relationship. Thus, the verse may

be correcting the misinterpretations of the pagans rather than addressing the Christian doctrine of the Sonship of Jesus. Alongside this conclusion, the exegetical work of Neuwirth (2009) further supports the argument that the Qur'an's rejection of God having a son was aimed at pagan Arab beliefs rather than Christian doctrine. This is that, in her detailed analysis of Q. 19 (Sūrat Maryam) and related passages, Neuwirth provides compelling evidence that the Qur'anic rejections of God having a son were primarily directed at pagan misinterpretations of Jesus' nature rather than the orthodox Christian understanding of his divine sonship. Neuwirth (2009) notes that the original form of Q. 19 presented the stories of Mary and Jesus as edificatory narratives highlighting God's power and mercy, without engaging in debates about Jesus' ontological status. This suggests an early consensus in Muhammad's community about Jesus' role as a non-divine prophet. The later addition in Q 19:34–40, which explicitly refutes the notion of God having a son, is interpreted by Neuwirth (2009) as a response to pagan Meccans who had adopted Jesus as God's literal, biological offspring alongside the daughters they ascribed to him, rather than a polemic against Christian beliefs. This interpretation is supported by close parallels in Q. 43 (Sūrat az-Zukhrufi), where the Qur'an presents pagans claiming that their female deities are superior to Jesus, and firmly rejects the notion of any divine family. Based on her analysis, Neuwirth concludes that the Qur'anic rejection of God having a "walad" (which, again, is a term implying a biological, procreated offspring) targets pagan misconceptions that had crept into Arabian belief systems, rather than the Christian doctrine of Jesus' divine sonship, which did not express his filial relationship with God in such literal, physical terms. In addition to this, the position defended by Khorchide and von Stosch and Neuwirth is further supported by the work of Crone (2010) who examines the Qurʾānic evidence regarding the beliefs of the pagan opponents (mušrikūn) of Muhammad's message. In her work, Crone (2010) noted that the mušrikūn believed in the same God (Allah) as Muhammad. This is that they saw Allah as the sole creator and the source of their laws and customs. However, they also venerated lesser divine beings, called both gods and angels, including some identifiable Arabian deities. They saw these as intercessors between themselves and God. The mušrikūn sometimes referred to these lesser beings as "daughters of God", which was a concept that Muhammad ridiculed—with Crone (2010) arguing these were not literally daughters but emanations of the divine. In condemning the beliefs of the mušrikūn, Crone (2010) notes that Muhammad utilised arguments used by earlier monotheists, especially Christians, against pagan worship of intermediary deities. And the combination of belief in the Biblical God along with Arabian deities/angels, sometimes female, was distinctive to the mušrikūn. Crone (2010) thus speculates that this amalgamation may have thus arisen from the magical practices of Jews and "Judaising pagans" in Arabia, in which pagan deities came to be accepted as angels and invoked for supernatural aid. Thus, Crone's (2010) analysis of the Qurʾanic evidence regarding the beliefs of the mušrikūn supports the position being argued here, as her findings, again, suggest that the Qurʾan was not critiquing the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Sonship of Jesus but rather a distorted version of it that was prevalent among certain groups in the Arabian Peninsula at the time. Finally, in Q. 5:17.72, these verses, as with the previous ones, address specific theological misconceptions, and, thus, do not offer, as noted by Khorchide and von Stosch (2019, pp. 111–12), a broad critique of Christianity but target the conflation of Jesus with God, a stance that misrepresents the mainstream Christian Trinitarian doctrine. This is that, for the former verse, Q. 5:17, this verse aims to correct the assertion that "God is the Messiah, the son of Mary", a viewpoint which, strangely, reverses the Christian declaration—from "the Messiah is God" to "God is the Messiah"—which is one that "orthodox" Christians, as noted by Khorchide and von Stosch (2019) do not claim. Moreover, this declaration undermines the distinct personhoods within the Trinity

by misconstruing the nuanced Christian understanding of Jesus' divinity and humanity. Hence, the Qur'anic response emphasises God's singular authority—that is the Father's singular authority, who, according to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 CE), *is* the one "God" and *the* "Almighty"—thus, countering any notion that equates Jesus or Mary with the person of the Father, which could be seen as a refutation of modalism or patripassianism, heresies that confuse the persons within the Godhead. Now, for the latter verse, Q 5:72, the Qur'an attributes a declaration to Jesus urging the worship of God alone, which aligns with the Qur'an's central message of monotheism and underscores Jesus' role as a prophet, not as an object of worship. This perspective resonates with the Christian emphasis on Jesus' mission to reveal God (i.e., the Father), point all worship *to* him—though *through* Christ—and not usurp *his* divine status, thus, addressing any potential misinterpretations or exaggerations within Christian expressions of Jesus' identity. Hence, this Qur'anic critique is, thus, directed at specific theological exaggerations, ensuring the acknowledgement of God's unmatched sovereignty and the proper understanding of Jesus' role within Islamic and, arguably, Christian theological frameworks. Thus, given all of this, the Qur'an, at a general level, can, thus, be seen as addressing and correcting specific theological misunderstandings or incorrect practices of the time, rather than making a blanket critique of all Christian doctrinal beliefs and teachings, which, thus, allows one to understand how Christians—of the "orthodox" variety—could indeed be full members of the community of Believers.

Now, in turning our attention back to the narrative portion of our explication of the Pan-Abrahamic thesis proposed by Donner (2010), after the death of Prophet Muhammad, the community of Believers expanded its boundaries beyond that established by the Prophet during his life, through the leadership of the *umarāʾ al-muʾminīn* ("Commanders of the Believers") Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, and Uthman ibn Affan, Ali ibn Abu Talib, Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, and Yazid ibn Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan. However, as noted by Donner (2010, p. 109), the expansion of the Believers' community beyond Arabia, traditionally depicted as a military conquest, presents complexities when scrutinised more closely. That is, traditional Islamic narratives often portray this expansion as a series of military offensives against the Byzantine and Persian empires, featuring significant battles and sieges. This depiction aligns with some near-contemporary Christian accounts from the region. For instance, as Donner (2010, p. 106) notes, Thomas the Presbyter's writings from around 640 CE detail a conflict involving the "Romans" and Prophet Muhammad's followers near Gaza, resulting in substantial casualties among local villagers, including Christians, Jews, and Samaritans. However, the archaeological evidence does not uniformly corroborate a narrative of widespread violent conquest, especially in geographical Syria, an area that is well-documented by literary sources and thoroughly investigated by archaeologists. This evidence, according to Donner (2010, p. 107), suggests more of a gradual socio-cultural transformation rather than abrupt, widespread destruction. Many towns and cities exhibit continuity in their urban life, with numerous churches not only remaining intact but continuing to function or even being newly constructed well after the period of the supposed conquests. For instance, as noted by Donner (2010, p. 107), archaeological findings show that churches within these regions were not universally destroyed or abandoned. Instead, many continued to serve their congregations, or new churches were built, indicating a level of religious tolerance or coexistence. This is exemplified by the continued use and construction of churches with dated mosaic floors, which suggests an ongoing Christian presence and activity. The narrative of violent conquest is further complicated when considering the sociological dynamics of the expansion. That is, the regions into which the Believers expanded, such as Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Iran, had deep-rooted religious traditions with systems in place to defend their beliefs. The lack of immediate and

widespread religious polemics against the Believers' doctrines suggests that the imposition of a new religion by force would likely have been met with significant resistance and is not fully reflected in the historical record. Moreover, as the early Believers' movement was characterised by its ecumenical approach, which was more inclusive and aimed at establishing political dominance while advocating for a monotheistic moral framework, this approach, as Donner (2010) notes, likely facilitated the integration or acquiescence of local populations. Some communities may have resisted, but many, particularly monotheistic groups, like Jews, Samaritans, and various Christian sects, found the terms of the Believers acceptable or even preferable to previous rulers. The "violent conquest" theory, as Donner (2010, pp. 106–7) terms it, thus, struggles to explain the successful integration of the Believers without significant local opposition or the conquerors' maintenance of a distinct identity without substantial local infrastructure. The alternative view that conceives the Believers' expansion as largely non-violent, aligns with their ecumenical approach, where monotheistic communities could join the Believers without renouncing their faiths, merely accepting new political leadership and tax obligations. Notably, the early Believers were not intent on destroying existing religious infrastructures. Instead, according to Donner (2010, p. 117), evidence suggests that they often shared places of worship with Christians. This is that, the practice of the newly arrived Arabian Believers praying in Christian churches, due to the lack of their own mosques, indicates a period of religious intermingling. Furthermore, archaeological findings, such as modifications in church structures to include Islamic prayer niches while retaining their original Christian orientation, support this notion of shared religious spaces.

In further corroborating this conclusion, Shoemaker (2011) notes that in the seventh century, Syriac writers primarily depicted Prophet Muhammad as the "king of the Arabs", not as a prophet, which indicated that his associated community may not have been seen as a distinct religious group. This perspective aligns with the position reached here that "Believers" lacked a definitive religious identity then. Moreover, according to Shoemaker (2011, p. 211), John bar Penkaye, who was writing from late seventh-century northern Mesopotamia, portrays Prophet Muhammad as a "guide", thus recognising his leadership without deeming him a prophet. This indicates, John notes, as explained by Shoemaker (2011, p. 211), Prophet Muhammad's specific respect for Christians, thus suggesting an era of mutual respect rather than conflict. Moreover, John's observations that the new religious movement allowed people to retain their faiths (merely imposing a tribute), thus depicts an inclusive community. This inclusivity, according to Shoemaker (2011, p. 212), is echoed by East Syrian patriarch Ishoʿyahb III and the Samaritan *Continuatio*, who both note the early Islamic rulers' tolerance towards Christianity and other monotheistic religions. Moreover, John of Damascus's later characterisation of Islam as a Christian heresy might traditionally be seen as polemical. However, considering Donner's (2010) findings, it could also be interpreted, as noted by Shoemaker (2011, p. 212), as an acknowledgement of the early Islamic community's inter-confessional nature and its significant overlap with Christian practices and beliefs. Additionally, the involvement of John and his family in the Umayyad administration (thus him being in a position to have a particularly well-informed view) through them holding high-level positions—where his father served as secretary and chief financial administrator to each of the early Umayyad caliphs in their capital at Damascus, which included Mu'awiya, Yazid, Mu'awiya ibn Yazid, Marwan ibn al-Ḥakam, and 'Abd al-Malik—and John himself having served as a high-ranking financial official in the Umayyad administration before he himself became a priest and monk—which, thus, further exemplifies this non-sectarian aspect.[12] That is, such integration within the Umayyad governance would be unlikely if the early Islamic community was strictly sectarian. Moreover, the presence of Christian soldiers in Islamic military campaigns,

notably bearing Christian symbols, underscores this era's inter-confessional inclusivity. This is that, as noted by Shoemaker (2011, p. 213), certain individuals of the Kalb and Taghlib tribes are reported to have marched with Yazid's army into the Ḥijāz bearing as standards the cross and also the banner of their patron, St. Sergius. Thus, this type of participation in the military campaigns of the Umayyads—particularly whilst also bearing these openly Christian symbols—seems to presume the full membership of these Christians—*as Christians*—within the community of the Believers.

The evidence from this period, as noted by Shoemaker (2011), thus depicts an early Islamic community that was notably inclusive and non-sectarian, characterised by a high degree of religious tolerance and integration, contrasting later, more rigidly defined Islamic identity. This portrayal underscores a complex and nuanced understanding of early Islamic expansion and the role of religious identity within it. Importantly, however, this position concerning the interconfessional community of Believers during the time of Prophet Muhammad and the early *umarāʾ al-muʾminīn* (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, Ali, Mu'awiya, and Yazid) experienced a significant transformation, according to Donner (2010), in the Islamic faith, under the leadership of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik who ruled from 685 to 705 CE. This specific period, roughly within seventy years after the Prophet Muhammad's death, is crucial, as noted by Donner (2010), for understanding the evolution of Islam as it encountered the diverse religious landscape of the Near East. 'Abd al-Malik's leadership marked a pivotal era in which the Believers were encouraged to redefine their identity, focusing less on a broad, ecumenical approach and more on adhering to Qur'anic law. This shift, according to Donner (2010, pp. 203–4), narrowed the definition of "Believer" to those strictly following Qur'anic mandates, thus establishing a clear divide between these Believers and Christians or Jews who were initially part of the same movement. Initially, as noted previously, Believers used the terms *mu'minun* (Believers) and *muhajirun* (those who emigrated for religious reasons) to describe themselves. And the term "muslim" began to evolve during the time of 'Abd al Malik, initially, as noted previously, encompassing all monotheists but gradually becoming exclusive to those following Qur'anic law, thereby excluding Christians and Jews. This redefinition also affected the relationship between the terms "mu'minun" and "muslim", which came to be used almost interchangeably for those within the Qur'anic law-abiding community, which was very different from its usage during the time of Prophet Muhammad.[13] Moreover, as noted by Donner (2010, pp. 205–11), 'Abd al-Malik's emphasis on the centrality of Prophet Muhammad for the muslim life and the wide promulgation of the Qur'an across the expanse of the lands inhabited by the community of Believers—now "Muslims"—further solidified this new identity. That is, his reign saw Prophet Muhammad's name and mission become central to the Believers' collective identity, a shift evidenced in inscriptions and official documents of the time, such as the Dome of the Rock's inscriptions and the reformed coinage that featured Islamic declarations of faith.

This period also witnessed a re-evaluation of Islamic practices and the narrative of Islamic origins, with a growing emphasis on Qur'anic law shaping the community's rituals and beliefs (Donner 2010). Furthermore, the development of an "Arab" political identity among the ruling elite, linked to the Arabic language and Qur'anic scripture, marked a move away from a broader, more inclusive Believers' movement to a distinctly Muslim identity. Thus, under 'Abd al-Malik, the Islamic community underwent a profound transformation, marking a shift from a broad monotheistic fellowship to a distinct religious entity with its own set of beliefs, practices, and symbols of identity. That is, 'Abd al-Malik's era, as noted by Donner (2010), was crucial in transforming the loosely defined, ecumenical Believers' movement into a more defined, distinct Islamic identity, highlighting a shift from a broad coalition of monotheists to a community specifically aligned with the teachings

of the Qur'an and the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad. This transformation was influenced by both official policy and broader shifts in the community's self-perception, laying the foundations for the distinct religious and cultural identity of Islam.

In further evidencing Donner's position regarding early Islamic identity formation, Lindstedt (2019) conducted a comprehensive analysis of early Arabic epigraphic material through the lens of social identity theory (SIT). His study encompasses approximately 100 published Arabic inscriptions dated between 23–132/643–750, representing the most substantial contemporary evidence for understanding early Muslim identity development. The theoretical underpinning of SIT, as Lindstedt (2019, pp. 157–58) explains, provides valuable insights into how groups form, maintain boundaries, and develop distinct identities. This framework, though developed for modern social psychology, proves remarkably useful for analysing historical identity formation, particularly in understanding how the early Muslim community distinguished itself from other religious groups. The methodological rigour of Lindstedt's study is evident in his careful treatment of the epigraphic evidence. He acknowledges the limitations of working with only dated inscriptions, excluding those dated through palaeography alone, while emphasising that these dated materials provide crucial contemporary evidence that other sources cannot match. As Lindstedt (2019, pp. 172–73) notes, these inscriptions are particularly valuable because they were produced by the community itself, often by individuals outside the scholarly and political elite, offering unique insights into grassroots religious expression. The earliest layer of inscriptions, dating from the 20s–60s AH/640s–680s CE, though limited to just 13 dated examples, provides crucial evidence for understanding the initial "Believer" phase of Islamic identity. And these inscriptions demonstrate specific characteristics that align with Donner's thesis about the early community. For instance, the 29 AH inscriptions from Wādī Khushayba by Yazīd ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Salūlī exemplify the focus on divine mercy and forgiveness characteristic of this period. As Lindstedt (2019, p. 162) details, they contain simple but profound religious sentiments: "May God have mercy on Yazīd ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Salūlī' and 'O God, forgive Yazīd ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Salūlī". The evolution of religious expression becomes particularly evident in the monumental inscriptions of this early period. The 58 AH dam inscription commissioned by Muʿāwiya demonstrates how religious authority and political leadership intertwined, whilst maintaining the characteristic emphasis on divine forgiveness. Lindstedt (2019, pp. 163–64) highlights how these early inscriptions reflect three primary identifiable group identities: religious, tribal, and social status (free-born versus freedman/slave), though notably lacking any explicit Arab ethnic identity. A significant transformation occurs in the epigraphic record from the 70s/690s onwards, with approximately 80 dated inscriptions providing substantially more evidence. This second phase reveals an increasingly defined Muslim identity through various elements. The famous 72 AH Dome of the Rock inscription marks a crucial turning point, explicitly articulating Islamic doctrine in a public and permanent form. Lindstedt (2019, pp. 168–69) documents how inscriptions from this period incorporate increasingly specific religious elements: belief in One God without partners, acknowledgement of Muhammad's prophecy, belief in Paradise, angels, resurrection, and judgment day. The development of religious practices becomes increasingly visible in the epigraphic record during this period. Particularly significant in Lindstedt's (2019) analysis is the evidence regarding the development of the shahada—which is something also identified as Donner (2010). As Lindstedt (2019, p. 182) demonstrates, the earliest form of the shahāda likely did not include what we know today as its second part mentioning Muhammad's prophetic role. According to surviving exemplars from the early period, this proto-shahāda simply reads "there is no god but God alone, He has no partners" (*lā ilāh illā allāh waḥdahu lā sharīk lahu*). This simpler formulation, focusing solely on divine unity without explicit reference to Muhammad's prophecy, aligns

with the broader pattern of early Believer identity. The Prophet Muhammad's role appears somewhat ambivalent in early sources; as Lindstedt (2019, pp. 182–83) notes, even in the Qur'an, while, as noted previously, Muhammad is called both rasul and nabi, his importance is not overwhelming. The evolution of the shahāda to include the Prophet's role parallels the broader development of distinctly Muslim identity markers in the 70s/690s and beyond, thus reflecting the subsequent crystallisation of Islamic doctrinal elements. Furthermore, references to pilgrimage, prayer, and fasting appear with growing frequency, suggesting a standardisation of religious rituals. For example, the 100 AH inscription from Abū Ṭāqa provides evidence of pilgrimage practice: "we are [from the clan] ʿAnaza of [the tribe] al-Azd; we made the pilgrimage in the year one hundred [AH = 718–719 CE]; we ask God for paradise as lodgings" (Lindstedt 2019, p. 169). Particularly significant in the later inscriptional evidence is the emergence of religious warfare and martyrdom as key aspects of identity. Lindstedt (2019, pp. 194–95) documents several inscriptions from 78–117 AH that explicitly mention jihād and martyrdom. For instance, a 78 AH inscription near al-Ṭāʾif reads "and I ask Him for martyrdom on His path", while a 110 AH inscription from Southern Jordan demonstrates how pilgrimage and jihād became intertwined: "Before God prostrates Kāhil ibn ʿAlī ibn Aktham and upon Him he relies, asking God for jihād on His path; he made the pilgrimage in the year one hundred and ten". In addition to this, the absence of explicit Arab ethnic identity in these inscriptions challenges traditional narratives about early Islamic history. Despite writing in Arabic, none of the inscription authors identify themselves as Arab (al-ʿarabī/al-ʿarabiyya, min al-ʿarab). As Lindstedt (2019, pp. 170–71) emphasises, this suggests that religious identification was more salient than ethno-linguistic identity in the early period, contradicting assumptions about the primacy of Arab identity in early Islam. By the early second century AH (720s–730s CE), the evidence shows that Muslim identity had solidified around specific beliefs and practices. This is particularly evident in inscriptions mentioning "the totality of Muslims" (ʿāmmat al-muslimīn) and explicit references to Islam as a distinct religion. Moreover, the evidence for religious practices reveals fascinating patterns of development. The increasing frequency of references to pilgrimage, prayer, and fasting in later inscriptions suggests a standardisation of religious practices. Lindstedt (2019, p. 193) notes that pilgrimage appears in four different graffiti among the corpus, while prayer and fasting begin to feature more prominently in the inscriptional record, indicating the progressive codification of Islamic rituals. Furthermore, the social and communal aspects of identity formation become particularly evident in later inscriptions. Writers increasingly identify themselves as part of a broader Muslim community, suggesting a growing sense of collective religious identity. The appearance of terms, such as ʿāmmat al-muslimīn, indicates awareness of belonging to a distinct religious group with shared beliefs and practices, representing a significant shift from the more individually focused piety of earlier inscriptions. Lindstedt's analysis of Qur'anic evidence alongside the epigraphic material provides additional context for understanding early Muslim identity. He examines, similar to Donner, how the Qur'anic use of terms like islām and muslim(ūn) relates to their appearance in inscriptions, noting that these terms occur relatively rarely in the Qur'an compared to derivatives of āmana (believe). This linguistic evidence supports the argument for the subsequent development of distinctive Islamic terminology and identity markers. Additionally, the transformation of religious authority and leadership is also visible in the epigraphic record, as early inscriptions referring to the *amīr al-muʾminīn* (Commander of the Believers) give way to more explicitly Islamic titles and formulae. This evolution in political–religious terminology parallels the broader development of a distinct Islamic identity. In all, this comprehensive body of evidence strongly supports Donner's thesis about the later emergence of a distinctive Islamic identity. The transition from general monotheistic expressions to specific Islamic doctrines and

practices, documented through dated inscriptions, provides concrete evidence for understanding how Muslim identity evolved from a general "Believer" movement to a distinct religious community. The evidence presents a clear timeline of identity formation, showing how religious, social, and ritual elements coalesced into what would become recognisable Islamic identity.

In addition to the historical analysis that has been provided, we can now view this all from a theological perspective: Cole (2018), sees the position of Prophet Muhammad, and his community of Believers, to be one of "theological inclusivism" and "salvific pluralism". This is that, as Cole (2018, p. 89) notes, theologians categorise attitudes toward the salvation of individuals from different traditions into three perspectives: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivists assert that salvation is exclusive to their religion's adherents. Inclusivists acknowledge that while their religion holds the entirety of truth, other traditions may possess some aspects of it. And Pluralists believe that multiple religions offer valid routes to salvation. Within this framework, according to Cole (2018, p. 89), Prophet Muhammad, thus, promoted a form of "salvific pluralism" inclusive of all monotheistic faiths but excluding antagonistic North Arabian polytheists. That is, despite seeking peaceful relations with polytheists, Prophet Muhammad did not compromise theologically. The Qur'an explicitly states that adherence to a religion other than monotheism (*islām* in the context of Abrahamic faiths, not just Prophet Muhammad's teachings) will not be accepted in the afterlife. Thus, Prophet Muhammad, as Cole (2018, p. 89) notes, proposed that each faith community has dual covenantal duties: one to its specific messenger and another to a universal divine agreement. Faithfulness to their respective covenants provides a path to salvation—as the Qur'an praises the Torah and Gospel for their enduring guidance and light, critiquing Jews and Christians only when they stray from their scriptures' teachings. Moreover, the Qur'an, according to Cole (2018, p. 89), proposes a universal covenant where future generations pledge to recognise God's messengers, implying a moral lapse when Jews and Christians deny figures, such as Jesus or Prophet Muhammad. Yet, such a breach, while incorrect, is not deemed so severe as to preclude salvation if one leads a righteous life within their religious framework. Hence, while the Qur'an espouses "theological inclusivism"—viewing itself as the culmination of Abrahamic faiths—it promotes a "pluralistic view of salvation", suggesting that adherence to monotheism, regardless of specific doctrinal errors, offers a path to paradise. This stance contrasts with the exclusivism seen in the position of Islam that emerged after the time of 'Abd al-Malik, which mandated adherence to specific creeds for salvation. In essence, the Qur'an's approach and that of the overall teaching of Prophet Muhammad combine a commitment to doctrinal inclusivism with a broader, more accommodating view of salvation, respecting the core monotheistic integrity of various faiths while positing itself as the most accurate expression of God's will.

In summary, historical research into early Islamic communities indicates a nuanced progression from a broadly ecumenical, interconfessional, monotheistic group to a distinctly defined Muslim identity. This evolution reflects the interplay of socio-political factors, theological developments, and leadership influences during the early Islamic period. The reign of 'Abd al-Malik emerges as a critical period in this transformation, marked by the introduction of Islamic ascriptions and the standardisation of the Qur'an, which were instrumental in crystallising a unique Islamic identity. These findings highlight the dynamic nature of religious identity formation, emphasising how leadership, doctrinal shifts, and community self-perception collectively shape the identity of a religious community over time.[14]

4. The Nature of the Pan-Abrahamic Problem: A Challenge of Identity

As previously detailed, the Pan Abrahamic Thesis, articulated by Donner (2010) (Shoemaker, Cole and Lindstedt, and others), provides an insightful perspective into the early

Islamic community's theological and social ethos, highlighting its inclusivity and ecumenical nature. This thesis underscores a significant aspect of early Islamic identity, which was characterised by a broad, inclusive monotheism that acknowledged and embraced the shared spiritual heritage of the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Qur'anic Monotheism ('Islam'). The early community, as depicted in the Qur'anic discourse, was not exclusively identified by the term "Muslims" but more broadly as "Believers", reflecting a universalist orientation that transcended specific religious demarcations within the Abrahamic religions. This early Islamic ethos was marked by theological inclusivism and salvific pluralism, recognising the validity of other monotheistic paths and the potential for salvation across these traditions. Such a stance is evidenced by the Qur'anic acknowledgement of righteous individuals among Jews and Christians, affirming their integral role within the broader monotheistic, ethical framework that the Qur'an promotes. However, when evaluating the contemporary Islamic community through the twin criteria of continuity and the connectedness of doctrine and organisation that was unpacked previously, one can see that a significant divergence from this early inclusivism becomes apparent.

Focusing first on the continuity and connectedness of doctrine, one can clearly see that there is a lack of connectedness—where connectedness, as noted previously, requires that the characteristics of the subsequent community largely mirror those of the original founding community, such that the fundamental beliefs, practices, and theological outlook that were present at the inception of the community are still discernible and active within the contemporary community's framework. This is due to the fact that modern Islamic theology, particularly in its mainstream interpretations, often emphasises an exclusivist view of salvation, primarily confined to the Islamic faith. This perspective marks a departure from the early community's broader theological pluralism, which, as noted previously, indicates a transformation in the doctrinal identity of the Islamic community over the centuries. More precisely, the concept of salvific pluralism, which implies the possibility of salvation outside the explicit framework of "Islam", is not a predominant theme in contemporary Islamic discourse. Instead, the contemporary doctrinal stance is centred on a salvific exclusivism, where salvation is often seen as contingent upon explicit faith in the creeds of Islam and adherence to its prescribed practices and beliefs. And so, the transition from an inclusive, ecumenical community to a more defined and exclusivist identity raises questions about the continuity and connectedness of the Islamic doctrine over time. While the core tenets of Islam, such as monotheism, prophethood, and the Qur'anic revelations, maintain a clear thread of continuity, the interpretation and emphasis on salvific inclusivism represent a significant doctrinal evolution. In considering doctrine, the principle necessitates an unbroken progression of theological principles throughout the community's history. This is that the essential teachings of a faith should remain consistent and intact from one generation to the next, with each intermediary phase maintaining the core beliefs and interpretations established by the faith's founder. However, within the context of Islam, while the core tenets of Islam, such as monotheism, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the authority of the Qur'an, have indeed been consistently upheld, the inclusive interpretation of salvation has not seen the same unbroken progression. As noted before, the early Islamic community embraced a more inclusive and ecumenical stance towards salvation, allowing for a broader interpretation that included believers of other monotheistic faiths within the scope of the community of Believers. Over time, however, Islamic theology has developed, from the late 600s CE, towards an exclusivist perspective, where salvation is viewed as being contingent upon explicit faith within the Islamic framework. This change in the interpretation of salvific inclusivism signifies a discontinuity in the doctrinal development from the early Islamic community to contemporary times. The once broad and inclusive understanding of who constitutes the community of Believers and who can

achieve salvation has narrowed, with contemporary interpretations generally excluding non-Muslims from these considerations. This evolution of doctrine suggests that the contemporary Muslim community does not demonstrate an unbroken doctrinal continuity with the community established by Prophet Muhammad.

Turning our attention now onto continuity and connectedness of organisation, one can also see that there is a lack of connectedness of organisation, as the structure of the Believers community in the early Islamic context was notably inclusive, potentially encompassing Christians and Jews alongside Qur'anic Monotheists (later "Muslims") under a shared monotheistic belief system. This early community, thus, suggests an organisation where the boundaries of the religious community were not strictly confined to what would later be recognised solely as Islamic identity. Instead, it was a broader, more inclusive community, united by common beliefs and ethical principles rather than rigid religious demarcations. In contrast, the contemporary understanding and organisation of the Islamic community—the "Umma"—within Islamic thought have evolved significantly from this early, inclusive model. Today, the Islamic community is primarily understood as the global community of Muslims, exclusive of other religious groups. This contemporary conceptualisation reflects a more defined and exclusive religious identity, where theological inclusivism—particularly the idea that Christians and Jews are part of the Islamic community—is not a prevailing notion. More fully, the lack of connectedness in organisation concerning the inclusivity of the Islamic community is evident when comparing the contemporary Islamic community's structure with its early formation. In the Prophet Muhammad's time, there are historical accounts suggesting that Jews, in particular, and Christians, more generally, were considered part of the Islamic community, participating in the social and political life of the community in Medina. The Constitution of Medina, for instance, is often cited as evidence of this inclusivity, outlining a framework where various tribes, including Jewish ones, were part of a unified political and community structure. However, over time, the organisation of the Islamic community transitioned from this inclusive, ecumenical community to a more exclusivist Islamic identity. This transformation reflects changes in socio-political dynamics and historical developments that have shaped the Islamic community's self-perception and organisational structure. The contemporary organisation of the Islamic community, therefore, lacks the connectedness to its early formative phase in terms of inclusivity. While there is continuity in the concept of the Islamic community as a community of believers, the scope of who constitutes this community has narrowed. The early Islamic inclusivism that potentially embraced Jews and Christians within the Islamic community has given way to a more restricted interpretation, where the Islamic community is synonymous with the global Muslim community. This shift also reflects certain other elements of the organisational aspects of the Islamic community. That is, religious leadership, communal worship, and jurisprudential authority are now exclusively within the domain of the Muslim community, without the inclusivity that might have characterised the early Believers. This exclusivity extends to religious and community life, where the boundaries of the Islamic community delineate a clear distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, in contrast to the inclusivity of the past. Now, when we also examine this from the perspective of the criteria continuity of organisation—through the lens of an unbroken progression—it is evident that the modern conception of the Islamic community within Islamic thought does not align with its early inclusivity. That is, as already noted, a contemporary Islamic understanding typically confines the Islamic community to the global community of Muslims, indicating an exclusivity that contrasts sharply with the Prophet's more expansive community model. The organisational connectedness to Prophet Muhammad's community is, thus, interrupted—it lacks continuity with the early formative structure, which was marked by a broader, less rigidly defined religious identity. This shift from inclusivity to

exclusivity in the understanding of the Islamic community signifies a break in the organisational continuity of the Islamic community. Where the early community of Believers was a unified political and community structure accommodating diverse tribes and faiths, the contemporary Islamic community is defined by narrower boundaries that clearly delineate Muslim identity and exclude those of other faiths from its organisational structure. This has resulted in a redefined Islamic community, whose organisation is exclusively Islamic, both in leadership and in jurisprudential authority, deviating from the Prophet's inclusive community model.[15] The community's transition to a more exclusivist identity is, thus, marked by a discontinuity in its organisational structure, ultimately reflecting a significant evolution in the community's definition and scope.

This analysis of the doctrinal and organisational continuity and connectedness of the Islamic community and, thus, the evolution of this community from its inception under Prophet Muhammad to its contemporary form, thus, reveals a significant transformation.[16] This transformation, which is particularly evident in the shift from the inclusivist ethos of the early community to the more defined and exclusivist identity of the contemporary Islamic community, suggests that the modern Muslim community aligns more closely with the reforms and consolidations initiated by the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik rather than directly continuing the foundational principles established by Prophet Muhammad. That is, again, Prophet Muhammad's community was marked by a broad, inclusive approach, which was particularly evident in its treatment of the community of Believers, which initially included not only "Muslims" but also people of other monotheistic faiths, such as Christians and Jews. This inclusiveness was a defining feature of the early Islamic community, reflective of a broader vision of monotheism and shared Abrahamic heritage. However, during 'Abd al-Malik's reign, significant changes were implemented that began to distinctly shape the Islamic community's identity. As noted previously, 'Abd al-Malik is known for his efforts in solidifying the Islamic faith's institutional structure, standardising the Qur'anic text, and establishing Arabic as the empire's official language. His reign also witnessed the construction of Islamic architectural symbols like the Dome of the Rock, which not only served religious purposes but also asserted a distinctive Islamic identity. These reforms under 'Abd al-Malik were instrumental in defining a more exclusive Muslim identity, differentiating the Islamic community from other religious groups and establishing clear boundaries for the Islamic community. The shift towards a more exclusivist Islamic community, now defined strictly as the community of Muslims, reflects a departure from the inclusive, ecumenical approach of Prophet Muhammad's time. Consequently, when the contemporary Muslim community is examined through the lens of these historical developments, it appears to resonate more with the identity and structure consolidated under 'Abd al-Malik's leadership. The contemporary Islamic community's doctrinal stance, organisational structure, and religious practices reflect the influence of these reforms, which were pivotal in shaping the Islamic community's distinct identity. In short, the contemporary Islamic community of the 21st century *is* the community of 'Abd al-Malik and not that of Prophet Muhammad—that is, it is identical to (the same entity as) the community established under the reign of 'Abd al-Malik and not that of Prophet Muhammad—which is a significant problem, given the fact that that the latter individual, rather than former, is the divinely ordained and foundational figure within the religion of Islam.

The PAP thus presents a pressing issue for the contemporary adherent of Islam. Therefore, to address this problem, one could argue that it requires considering several potential solutions, each with its own set of implications: the first solution is *Ignoring the Issue*, where one might choose to overlook this issue. Yet, such a stance would conflict with the Qur'anic directive in Q. 4:59, which is to follow the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad (and those in authority among them). Hence, if the modern Islamic community diverges

significantly from the Prophet's community—as the Pan Abrahamic Thesis and the evidence of historical practice suggest—then ignoring this issue would imply a departure from the Qur'anic command and, thus, is not a viable solution for those who seek to align their practice with the Qur'an—and ultimately that of God's will. The second solution is *Rejecting the Criteria of Continuity and Connectedness*: the solution here could be to question the validity of continuity and connectedness as essential criteria for community identity. However, this approach runs counter to the intuitive understanding that we have that a given community (organisation, group, club etc.), if it is to be the same community (organisation, group, club etc.) as a temporally prior one, it should fulfil the same goals (aims) and be organised in the same (or a similar way), and within a religious context—where we also typically value the preservation and faithful transmission of foundational beliefs and practices over time—it must maintain a continuity and connectedness of doctrine and organisation. This solution is, thus, also not a viable option, as choosing it would present severe logical consistency issues. This is because if we reject the criteria of continuity and connectedness as essential for community identity, we would have to accept that any community could be considered identical to any other community regardless of how different their goals, structure, or practices might be. This leads to absurd conclusions—we would have to accept that, for instance, a modern chess club could be considered the same community as an ancient Roman gladiatorial school, or that a contemporary book club could be considered identical to the medieval Knights Templar, simply because we have abandoned any meaningful criteria for establishing identity over time. Furthermore, this rejection would create a fatal contradiction in religious contexts. If we deny the need for continuity and connectedness, we simultaneously invalidate the entire concept of religious tradition and succession that religions, including Islam, fundamentally rely upon. We cannot coherently claim to be following the teachings and community of Prophet Muhammad while simultaneously rejecting the very criteria that would make such a following meaningful and verifiable. In essence, rejecting these criteria would make any claim to religious authenticity or legitimate succession completely meaningless, thus making the solution self-defeating and logically incoherent. The third solution is that of *Rejecting the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis*: this would involve disputing the historical accuracy of the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis. However, this is problematic as the substantial historical evidence indicates the veracity of this thesis—by it being supported by a myriad of early Islamic texts, epigraphic evidence, and records. Thus, dismissing this thesis would require one to refute the historical documentation and interpretations that support it, which poses a considerable challenge. Hence, we, thus, again, do not have a viable option presented through this solution, as choosing this option, and thus rejecting the Pan Abrahamic Thesis, would require us to abandon our commitment to evidence-based reasoning and rational inquiry. However, if we are to be rational, and thus form beliefs that align with reality and truth, we must base these beliefs upon the best available evidence rather than dismissing evidence simply because it challenges our pre-existing beliefs or leads to uncomfortable conclusions. Hence, to reject the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis despite the overwhelming historical evidence supporting it would be to prioritise comfortable falsehoods over uncomfortable truths—a stance that is fundamentally incompatible with sincere truth-seeking and intellectual integrity. Lastly, the fourth solution is that of *Accepting the Results and Seeking Reformation*: this solution involves acknowledging the discrepancies highlighted by the Pan Abrahamic Thesis and our intuitive twin criteria of continuity and connectedness doctrine and organisation, striving for a reformation that seeks to realign the modern Islamic community with the more inclusive ethos of the early Islamic community. This path, thus, requires a willingness to engage in critical self-examination and an openness to reformation—a process that would not only involve doctrinal adjustments but also organisational changes to reintegrate the

spirit of inclusivity into the Islamic community. Now, such a reformation would necessitate a deep and extensive re-evaluation of the Islamic doctrine, jurisprudence, and community structure to recover the broader, more inclusive vision of the Islamic community as initially conceived. It would imply revisiting the teachings of Prophet Muhammad in light of early practices and the Qur'anic ethos, potentially leading to significant shifts in contemporary Islamic identity and practice. This is indeed a tough task, but it is one that an individual who seeks fidelity to God through his revelation in the Qur'an and the life and teaching that is accessible through historical investigation will want to do. However, from the perspective of traditional Islamic groups— whether Sunni, Shi'a, or others who adhere to established Islamic legal schools and theological traditions—this reformation option presents an insurmountable challenge. This is because these traditional groups view the interpretations, practices, and theological frameworks developed in the centuries after 'Abd al-Malik as divinely guided and authoritative. The established schools of Islamic law (*madhahib*), theological doctrines, and traditional methodologies of interpretation (*usu*l) are considered by these groups to be the authentic expression and continuation of Prophetic teachings, preserved through an unbroken chain of scholarly transmission (*isnad*). For these traditionalists, questioning or reforming these established frameworks would be tantamount to questioning the divine guidance they believe was operative in their development and preservation. Additionally, since these traditional groups view *ijma'* (scholarly consensus) as a binding source of religious authority, departing from centuries of established consensus to return to a more inclusive early model would be seen as violating a fundamental principle of their religious methodology. Thus, while the historical evidence strongly points towards to an early inclusive community, traditional Muslims are bound by their theological commitments to maintain the exclusivist interpretations and structures that developed after 'Abd al-Malik, even if these differ from the earliest Islamic community. And thus this option would not be open to a large number of Muslims.

Lastly, the fifth solution is that of *Accepting the Results and Rejecting the Religion*: this solution involves acknowledging the discrepancies highlighted by the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis and the intuitive twin criteria of continuity and connectedness of doctrine and organisation, but instead of seeking reformation, it leads to a rejection of the Islamic religion altogether. This path requires a willingness to confront the implications of the historical evidence and the philosophical argument that has been developed in light of it, even if they challenge the very foundations of one's religious identity. If the modern Islamic community is indeed not a direct continuation of the original community established by Prophet Muhammad and if the shift towards exclusivism represents a significant departure from the inclusive ethos of the early Islamic period, then one might conclude that the Islamic religion, as it is practised today, is not an authentic representation of the divine message. More poignantly, this realisation leads to the conclusion that the Islamic religion, as a continuous entity, *ceased to exist at the point of divergence from the inclusive ethos of the early community*—which was likely after the death of Prophet Muhammad and the last of the *umarāʾ al-muʾminīn* before the time of 'Abd al Malik. And so, the discrepancies between the foundational principles and the present day might be seen as so significant that the religion itself, as originally conceived, no longer exists. Accepting this position would mean acknowledging that the contemporary Islamic community, having strayed too far from its original foundations, cannot be considered a legitimate continuation of Prophet Muhammad's community (built upon his teachings). Instead, it represents a fundamentally different entity that emerged following the shift towards exclusivism—in other words, this community is *not* that of Prophet Muhammad's but that of the (non-divinely authorised) 'Abd al Malik's. In short, a contemporary Muslim is not a follower of Prophet Muhammad, rather they are a follower of 'Abd Al Malik. This is indeed

a radical perspective, but it is one that an individual who values historical truth and philosophical consistency might feel compelled to adopt, even if it means reconceptualising their understanding of the Islamic religion's existence and continuity. The challenge then becomes grappling with the implications of this perspective, both in terms of one's personal spiritual journey and the broader religious landscape, as it suggests that the Islamic faith, as it was originally established, is no longer present in the contemporary world. Now, each of these options out of the dilemma is difficult to choose; yet, on the basis of rationality, one must indeed be chosen—rationality shows that the fifth option must be chosen, as it is the only solution that maintains both logical consistency and historical accuracy. The historical evidence strongly supports the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, demonstrating that early Islam was fundamentally inclusive of other Abrahamic faiths, whilst the intuitive criteria of continuity and connectedness in both doctrine and organisation are essential for establishing the identity of any community over time. When these two factors are considered together, it becomes clear that the modern Islamic community fails to meet these criteria when compared to Prophet Muhammad's original community, as it reflects 'Abd al-Malik's exclusivist reforms rather than Muhammad's inclusive approach. The first three solutions—ignoring the issue, rejecting the criteria, or rejecting the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis—all require abandoning either historical evidence or logical reasoning, which would be irrational. Similarly, the fourth solution of reformation is practically impossible for most Muslims due to established theological commitments and the binding nature of scholarly consensus (*ijma'*). This leaves only the fifth option—accepting that the original Islamic religion ceased to exist after its divergence from Muhammad's inclusive community—as the sole solution that maintains both intellectual honesty and rationality. This conclusion, whilst radical, follows necessarily from the premises established by the historical evidence and philosophical arguments presented. To choose any other option would require either denying clear historical evidence or abandoning logical consistency, neither of which is compatible with rational inquiry. Thus, rationality requires us to accept this fifth solution, however difficult its implications might be for contemporary Islamic identity and practice.

The acceptance of this stark conclusion raises an important question: *why* does rationality specifically require us to embrace this particular view, which seems to undermine the very foundation of contemporary Islamic identity and practice? To answer this, we can revisit the options presented by the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis but now through the lens of rational inquiry—and thus examine each choice in light of the essential conditions that a rational decision must satisfy. These conditions include maintaining logical coherence by adhering to the law of non-contradiction, demonstrating evidential adequacy by accepting the substantial historical evidence supporting the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis (including Qur'anic distinctions, the Constitution of Medina, historical accounts, early Islamic artifacts, and Hadith narratives, etc.), following valid deductive reasoning from established premises, and upholding epistemic responsibility by acknowledging evidence even when it challenges traditional Islamic self-understanding. By subjecting each of the five options to this rational analysis, we can determine which choice emerges as the most intellectually honest and rational option, even if it leads to a deeply unsettling conclusion about the nature of contemporary Islamic religious identity. We will keep this analysis brief (as we have already unpacked some of these issues above, and for space requirements), concluding that upon examining the five options through the lens of these rationality conditions, Options 1 through 4 fail to meet these essential criteria. As, first, Option 1's choice to ignore the issue violates epistemic responsibility and logical coherence by a desire, on the one hand, to upheld the authority of the Qur'an, but also, on the other hand, needing to disregard clear Qur'anic directives in order to choose this option. Second, Option 2's rejection of the twin criteria of connectedness and continuity also violates logical coherence by abandoning

essential principles for establishing meaningful identity over time. Third, Option 3's rejection of the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis fails to satisfy evidential adequacy given the extensive historical record documented by scholars, such as Donner, Shoemaker, Cole, and Lindstedt (and many more others). Fourth, Option 4's attempt to reform while maintaining identity violates logical coherence and is practically impossible for most Muslims due to established theological commitments and a binding scholarly consensus. In contrast, and finally, it can be seen that Option 5 alone satisfies all conditions of rationality: it maintains logical coherence by acknowledging the discontinuity between Prophet Muhammad's ecumenical community and the contemporary exclusivist Islamic community, respects evidential adequacy by accepting the historical transformation documented in early Islamic sources, follows valid deductive reasoning from the premises concerning community identity and historical change, and demonstrates epistemic responsibility by accepting, despite the weight of Islamic tradition, that the contemporary Islamic community is identical to 'Abd al-Malik's reformed community rather than Prophet Muhammad's original one. Thus, through this evaluation of rationality's conditions, Option 5 emerges as the only rationally acceptable choice—and even though accepting this conclusion may be challenging, rationality compels us to embrace it.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the central focus of the article was the exploration of the Pan-Abrahamic nature of early Islam and its implications for understanding the identity of the contemporary Islamic community. In Section 1, the article outlined the traditional view of Prophet Muhammad's leadership and the establishment of the Islamic community, the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, and the conceptual problem that it presents to an adherent of Islam concerning the identity of the contemporary Islamic community. In Section 2, the focus was on explicating Swinburne's criteria of continuity and connectedness to analyse the identity of communities, thus providing a nuanced framework for evaluating the Islamic community's historical and theological evolution. Section 3 focused on elucidating the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, highlighting the inclusivity of the early Islamic community and presenting evidence that suggested an ecumenical approach that embraced various Abrahamic faiths. Section 4 then focused on elucidating the Pan-Abrahamic Problem, contrasting the early inclusive Islamic community with the more exclusivist contemporary understanding and, thus, raising a challenge concerning its continuity and connectedness in doctrine and organisation and, thus, the identity of the foundational community established by Prophet Muhammad and that of the contemporary Islamic community. In all, this article provided a challenge to certain traditional exclusivist narratives and assumptions within Islam and encouraged a re-evaluation of Islamic community identity in light of the historical evidence and theological/philosophical considerations presented by the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] This thesis is also referred to as the "Fuzzy Borders" thesis, in order to indicate that the early Islamic community did not have strict borders between itself and the various other Islamic faiths.

[2] Donner (2002) was his first exploration of the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis. However, Donner (2010) provided an updated and more expansive treatment of the topic and, thus, it is this specific work that will be at the centre of our analysis in Section 3.

[3] This is a non-exhaustive list of scholars who agree with some version of the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis and/or Fuzzy Borders: Donner (2002, 2010), Penn (2015, p. 180), Crone and Cook (1977, chps. 1–2), Shoemaker (2011, chp. 4), Cole (2018, *passim*), Vuckovic (2004, pp. 42–43), Firestone (2010, p. 53), Munt (2015, p. 251, n. 5), Lindstedt (2019), Abedinifard (2022, p. 30), Afsaruddin (2008, p. 7), Lamptey (2014), Berkey (2002, pp. 92–93), Hawting (2005), Robinson (2010), Brockopp (2017, pp. 48–50), and Hoyland (2015, pp. 57–60). I am fully in debt to that of Hashmi (2023) for compiling this list of scholars.

[4] The argument detailed above can be stated formally as follows:
Let C1 be the founding religious community established by the founder, and C2 be a later religious community.
P1: $\forall$(C1, C2) [($\neg$(Continuity(C2, C1) $\wedge$ Connectedness(C2, C1))) $\rightarrow$ $\neg$Identity(C2, C1)]
P2: Continuity(CMC, FMC) $\wedge$ Connectedness(CMC, FMC)
P3: $\neg$(Continuity(CMC, FMC) $\wedge$ Connectedness(CMC, FMC))
C1: $\neg$(Continuity(CMC, FMC) $\wedge$ Connectedness(CMC, FMC)) (From P2, P3)
C2: $\neg$Identity(CMC, FMC) (From P1, C1)
C3: ($\neg$Identity(CMC, FMC)) $\rightarrow$ (Option1 $\vee$ Option2 $\vee$ Option3 $\vee$ Option4 $\vee$ Option5)
where:

- Continuity(X, Y) means religious community X has doctrinal and organisational continuity with religious community Y.
- Connectedness(X, Y) means religious community X has doctrinal and organisational connectedness with religious community Y.
- Identity(X, Y) means religious community X is identical to religious community Y.
- FMC is the founding Muslim community established by Muhammad.
- CMC is the contemporary Muslim community.
- Option1: Ignore the issue, despite Qur'anic directives.
- Option2: Reject continuity and connectedness criteria, despite intuitive plausibility.
- Option3: Reject the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, despite the evidence.
- Option4: Accept results and reform to align with early Islam's inclusivity, requiring the overturning of tradition.
- Option5: Accept results and reject Islam as no longer existing as originally conceived.

Therefore, given the lack of continuity and connectedness between the contemporary Muslim community and Muhammad's founding community, the two communities are not identical. Consequently, Muslims must choose one of the five options in response to this conclusion—with one in particular being the rational option—namely, as will be concluded at the end of the article, Option5.

[5] In Swinburne's (2007) work, he resituates these criteria within a Christian context. The moves that are made now are similar to what Swinburne does within that context; however, in order to apply it within the subsequent sections to an Islamic context, it would be good to unpack this within a more generalised theistic context.

[6] The grounds for this dating are such things as the Qur'an's lack of anachronisms.

[7] Thus, it is important to note that being a "Muslim" in the early community meant submitting to God, while being a "believer" meant having true faith and following God's teachings, regardless of one's specific religious affiliation (Quranic Pagan, Jewish, Christian, etc.).

[8] Specifically, the Banu Kalb and Taghlib tribes.

[9] And, thus, the position now explicated here is not proposed by Donner (2010) but is a combinatorial response to recent scholarly work in the contemporary literature concerning the issue that, in combination and application to this issue, is original to this article.

[10] Block (2011) shows throughout his work that the correct translation of the Arabic word "thalatha" is "third of three", not "is a trinity".

[11] Such as Q. 5:73.

[12] An interesting fact is also that of Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan marrying a Christian woman called Maysun bint Bahdal of the Christian tribe Banu Kalb, and Yazid, thus, being a child of a Christian mother.

[13] Additionally, over time, the use of "muhajirun" declined, possibly due to the changing circumstances in the empire or the changing composition of the Believers' community.

[14] It is important to note that the prominent scholars Al-Azmeh (2014) and Neuwirth (2019) both provide frameworks that substantiate the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis regarding early Islam's inclusivity, as outlined by Donner. Al-Azmeh (2014) argues that Islam evolved within the broader socio-political and religious milieu of Late Antiquity, influenced by the ecumenical and monotheistic traditions of the era, including those of the Roman and Byzantine empires. This situates Islam not as a radical departure, but as an extension of late antique monotheistic and imperial ideologies, supporting the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, which views early Islam as an inclusive "Community of Believers" that initially encompassed a broad range of monotheistic groups.

Similarly, Neuwirth (2019) examines the Qur'an's engagement with Judeo-Christian traditions, proposing that the text was deeply interwoven with the religious dialogue of the period. By highlighting intertextuality between the Qur'an and earlier scriptures, Neuwirth supports the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis by showing that the Qur'an did not emerge in isolation but was in conversation with pre-existing monotheistic beliefs, allowing for an inclusive interpretation that aligns with the portrayal of the early Believers' community. Together, Al-Azmeh's historical framework and Neuwirth's textual analysis underscore the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis by demonstrating that early Islam was shaped by, and responsive to, the broader Abrahamic traditions of the time.

[15] I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for identifying the critical tension within Islamic theology regarding the interpretation of Qur'anic verses about the People of the Book, particularly in relation to Chapter 5, Verse 73, and Chapter 2, Verse 55. The reviewer insightfully noted how differing interpretations of these verses—either as evidence of inclusivity or exclusivity—reflect broader theological divisions within Islamic thought. This identification directly relates to the Pan-Abrahamic Problem by underscoring the doctrinal discontinuity between the early inclusive community of Believers, as suggested by the Pan-Abrahamic Thesis, and the exclusivist tendencies that have emerged in the contemporary Islamic community. This tension exemplifies the challenge of reconciling foundational inclusivism with later theological developments, which ultimately complicates the continuity of Islamic community identity over time.

[16] It is essential to acknowledge that mainstream Islamic thought, as articulated by esteemed authorities, such as the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and other prominent Muslim scholars, has consistently upheld principles of respect and coexistence towards non-Muslims, particularly the People of the Book—including Jews, Christians, and Sabeans. Nonetheless, while mainstream Islamic thought consistently upholds principles of respect and coexistence towards non-Muslims, including the People of the Book, the primary focus of this article remains distinct. The Pan-Abrahamic Problem specifically examines the philosophical challenge of determining whether the contemporary Islamic community is identical to the foundational community established by Prophet Muhammad. This analysis utilises the criteria of continuity and connectedness in doctrine and organisation, independent of theological positions on interfaith relations. Consequently, although orthodox Islamic stances on coexistence provide essential context, the core argument regarding the identity and continuity of the Muslim community remains valid.

References

Abedinifard, Mostafa. 2022. Ridicule in the Qur'an. In *Muslims and Humour*. Edited by Bernard Schweizer, Lina Molokotos-Liederman and Yasmin Amin. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Afsaruddin, Asma. 2008. *The First Muslims: History and Memory*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

Al-Azmeh, Aziz. 2014. *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berkey, Jonathan. 2002. *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Block, Corrie. 2011. 'Philoponian Monophysitism in South Arabia at the Advent of Islam with Implications for the English Translation of 'Thalātha' in Qurʾān 4. 171 and 5. 73'. *Journal of Islamic Studies* 23: 50–75. [CrossRef]

Brockopp, Jonathan E. 2017. *Muhammad's Heirs: The Rise of Muslims Scholarly Communities, 622–950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cole, Juan. 2018. *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace Amid the Clash of Empires*. New York: Nation Books.

Crone, Patricia. 2010. The Religion of the Qurʾānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities. *Arabica* 57: 151–200. [CrossRef]

Crone, Patricia, and Michael Cook. 1977. *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Donner, Fred M. 2002. From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community. *al-Abhath* 50–51: 9–53.

Donner, Fred M. 2010. *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Firestone, Reuven. 2010. *An Introduction to Islam for Jews*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Hashmi, Javad T. 2023. Muhammad and the Submitters: When Jews and Christians Were Muslims. YouTube. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IzrIMl6Ctus (accessed on 14 March 2024).

Hawting, Gerald R. 2005. *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hoyland, Robert G. 2015. *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Khorchide, Mouhanad, and Klaus von Stosch. 2019. *The Other Prophet: Jesus in the Qur'an*. London: Gingko Library.

Lamptey, Jerusha Tanner. 2014. *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lindstedt, Ilkka. 2019. Who Is In, Who Is Out? Early Muslim Identity through Epigraphy and Theory. *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 46: 147–246.

Munt, Harry. 2015. No two religions: Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Ḥijāz. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 78: 249–69. [CrossRef]

Neuwirth, Angelika. 2009. Imagining Mary—Disputing Jesus. reading Surah Maryam and related Meccan texts within the Qur'anic Communication Process. In *Fremde, Feinde und Kurioses. Innen und Außenansichten unseres muslimischen Nachbarn*. Edited by Benjamin Jokisch, Ulrich Rebstock and Lawrence Conrad. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 383–416.

Neuwirth, Angelika. 2019. *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parfit, Derek. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Penn, Michael. 2015. *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Robinson, Chase F. 2010. The Rise of Islam, 600–705. In *The New Cambridge History of Islam. The New Cambridge History of Islam*. Edited by Chase F. Robinson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 171–225.
Shoemaker, Stephen J. 2011. *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's life and the Beginnings of Islam*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Swinburne, Richard. 2007. *Revelation*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University.
Vuckovic, Brooke. 2004. *Heavenly Journeys, Earthly Concerns: The Legacy of the Mi'raj in the Formation of Islam*. New York: Routledge.